

Performing the Feminine: Gold and Gender Performance in Kerala

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Abstract— Cultural discourses and practices have cemented the gendered identification of gold with women. With the advent of androgynous fashion since 1920s, attempts have been made to blur the culturally-validated gendered association of fashion. Nevertheless, gold jewellery still remains closely associated with femininity. This paper, which reads two jewellery ads in Kerala, seeks to understand how jewellery remains entrenched within its traditional gendered associations while strategically co-opting more progressive discourses that challenge the stereotypical performances of gender.

Keywords— Advertisements, androgynous fashion, femininity, gender, jewellery, Kerala



Introduction

Jewellery, especially gold, occupies multiple social functions in Kerala. As K.C. Mujeebu Rahman and Anindita Chakrabarti observe, “Gold is worn and displayed on the body as a form of adornment; it creates a distinct public presence, including status claims, notion of self and modes of identification” (291). With the coming in of androgynous fashion, attempts have been made to make fashion gender fluid. Multiple examples of such instances are available. But has it really succeeded in making an impact, especially in the case of gold jewellery? Two jewellery advertisements were released; one in 2021 and one in 2025. The 2021 jewellery ad was by Bhima Jewellery, “Pure as Love”, featuring transgender actress Meera Singhania Rehani. The advertisement talks about the journey of a transwoman and the role that gold plays in every stage of her journey. The second advertisement directed by Prakash Varma and featuring Mohanlal was released by Vinsmera jewellery in 2025. This paper has selected these two advertisements as the primary texts as it is instrumental in comprehending how even seemingly ‘ground-breaking’ advertisements that were hailed by the public for their inclusive politics subscribes to and even solidifies the gendered associations between jewellery and femininity. The paper reads these texts using the methodological framework of visual analysis. It looks at the selected advertisements as visual

texts that communicate meaning through the visuals and as discourses that cannot be separated from larger cultural narratives about gender.

The advertisement portrays Mohanlal as actor Mohanlal, wearing gold necklace, ring and bracelet and appreciating his beauty. The actions are very feminine and the advertisement ends with the dialogue ‘anyone would be tempted’ (translated by self). In the ad, Mohanlal on wearing the jewellery showcases feminine features and emotions. In the Bhima jewellery ad, the person, on embracing her femininity adorns herself more and more with gold. Though these two television advertisements were launched and accepted as ground breaking, stereotype-breaking, on a closer reading it is evident that both these ads subtly show that gold jewellery is associated with what is feminine.

Gold jewellery and gender

Existing scholarship on women and jewellery in India has made pivotal contributions in the ways in which gold jewellery is considered as the marker of married women (Dixit 2017). While gold remains a socio-cultural signifier of status, the onus of embodying the status of the family rests on the woman. As observed by Aparna Dixit, “... woman heavily adorn herself to symbolise status of her in-laws and it’s very gendered role of jewellery” (29). This

could be read closely with the ways in which women are positioned simultaneously as custodians of culture and as consumers who can make choices about what to buy. This suggests how women are seen both as “consumers and objects of consumption” (Ciochetto). On the other hand, the amount of gold a married man wears are minimal and reduced to a wedding ring and if more, a gold chain. While men adorn themselves with minimal jewellery, the amount of jewellery that a woman is expected to wear after marriage is incapacitating or hindering with their daily lives (Dixit 29).

Coming to the context of Kerala, gold jewellery has an identity as malleable as gold. Back in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries gold had an identity associated more with wealth. It did have an identity associated with gender but it was more or less equally masculine and feminine. Back then, gold on men stood for power and there was nothing effeminate in wearing jewellery (Ushakumari 2022). The kings and landlords adorned themselves with gold in plenty because gold back then, was prominently a symbol of wealth. But, century forward, in the twenty first century, gold has more of a female centric identity. This could be of two major reasons. One, the death of matrilineal system and the coming in of patrilineal system where in the concept of dowry gains prominence and the idea of a bride clad in gold ornaments started becoming a normal thing. Second could be the coming in of the Christian missionaries, colonialism and the seeping in of Victorian morals and standards which considered jewellery in men to be an effeminate thing (Ushakumari 2022). This is evident in novels such as o Chandumenon’s *Indulekha*, which played a major role in transmitting Victorian morality in Kerala society (Ahinasha). The novel contrasts Suri Namboothiri, who wears lot of jewellery to show his wealth, with Madhavan who refrains from this practice. Here, Madhavan’s abstinence from gold is seen as a marker of his refinement, self-restraint and education. Thus, we can see a shift in the idea of jewellery on men, abstinence from gold becoming more masculine and patriotic.

Adornment occupies a major role in all the special occasions in a Malayali household and gold jewellery enjoys a prominent role. The argument that gold in the twenty first century has a female centric identity is proven by the amount of gold worn by the bride on her wedding day compared to the amount of gold that the groom wears. The bride, if from a family that can afford ample amount of gold, adorn herself with various gold jewellery, literally from head to toe; on the other hand, the gold on groom is just a few pieces of jewellery like, ring, chain and bracelet. Thus, it would not be wrong to say that now, “Jewelry is frequently used to emphasize the differences between the male and female body for the purpose of social interaction”

(Russel 2010). K.C. Mujeeb Rahman and Anindita Chakrabarti in the article “Malabar Gold: Relational, Reproductive Saving, Gendered Property and Wealth Accumulation among Kerala Muslims” talk about the gendered role of gold. They say that in Malabar, Muslim men do not wear gold jewellery. “According to sharia, they are not permitted to wear even a gold ring” (Rahman and Chakrabarti). They go on to say that this distinction is evident even in the way people gift gold; boys are given gold coins and girls are given gold jewellery. This practice very well illustrates the deeply embedded association of gold jewellery and femininity, which starts even from a young age.

In the twenty first century, gold is still a matter of wealth and pride in Kerala society but the gender aspect of the jewellery has taken a more prominent position than in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. From childhood, girls go through experimentation with jewellery. “They directly or indirectly understand their gender in the frame of ornamentation” (Dixit 29). While for men, gold is more about social and cultural aspect, for women, there is more. It is about adornment, beautification, docility, symbol of marriage, security and a reserve for her future. “Jewellery has frequently functioned as the primary or soul source of wealth under direct control of women” (Dixit 30). The very famous normative Malayalam expression, which later became the tagline of Bhima jewellery ad, “*pennaayal ponnu venam*” (a woman must have gold) is something that every Malayali who lived in the first quarter of the twenty first century has seen, heard on different occasions through different media and has become a very familiar idea, though there are active effort from various people to undo that idea. Bhima jewellery went a further step ahead and added a little more to “*pennaayal ponnu venam*”. They added, “*patharamaatavalkekan Bhima than swarnam charthidenam*”, roughly translated as ‘to bring out the best version of her, she must be adorned with gold jewellery from Bhima’. Only when a woman is adorned with gold jewellery, can she look the prettiest or be the best, claims the jewellery ad. “Gold is not only viewed as a sign of wealth, but also as an expression of femininity” (Lindberg). Anna Lindberg interviewed three women of Scheduled Castes who had similar attitudes of considering women without gold as masculine. In the interview she came across views such as “Gold makes me feel more woman-like, more feminine”, “I am sorry, but to us, women like you are a bit masculine because they don’t have any gold” (Lindberg).

One can hardly find a jewellery ad in Malayalam that has no female actor or model featured in it. If it is a jewellery ad, there will be a woman wearing gold ornaments, looking gorgeous. Despite multiple efforts to undo the concept that every woman must have gold, jewellery shops and

advertisements still make use of that idea to propagate that false desire in the minds of the parents of a girl that their daughter ought to have at least a minimal amount of gold. Anna Lindberg observes that women of all castes told her that they tried to give their daughters gold when they married to keep a reserve for survival in times of hardship and starvation. This was back in the 1980s and the tradition still continues in most part of Kerala. Parents start buying gold for their daughters, right from their childhood, especially if they belong to a wealthy enough family, because of the idea that the girl should have enough gold especially on her wedding day is deeply entrenched in the Malayali psyche. “Men accumulate as much gold as they can for their daughter’s or sister’s wedding” (Rahman and Chakrabarti). The association of women and jewellery has gone beyond the materialist aspects and has acquired symbolic value, as well. The kind of jewellery that a woman wears can at times indicate the marital status of a woman. A married woman is expected to wear a *taali*. The social norm dictates that a married woman wears a *taali*, which is indicative of her allegiance towards her husband, culture and social norms. The fact that jewellery is more of a symbol of marriage for women is evident from the fact that no matter what many pieces of gold jewellery is sold or pawned, the last piece of jewellery left will be the *taali*. Gold thus holds symbolic value in the life of a married woman.

Gender in culture must be understood through the socialization that males and females undergo as part of developing an identity. Jewelry can be seen as such a method of socialization – not a result of innate differences between the sexes, but one of many methods used to inculcate difference, in status and in self-perception. (Russel 2010)

The amount of jewellery one wears, the kind of jewellery one wears and the fashion of the jewellery are all indicative of various factors of an individual. The traditional Kerala jewellery like the *manga maala*, *nagapada maala*, *kaashu maala*, *palakka maala*, *pichimottu maala*, *elakathali*, *oddyanam*, *jimikki*, *thoda*, *minnu*, and other intricate temple-inspired designer jewellery, are all associated with the female gender. These are all worn by women. And this traditional jewellery is exclusive to women of the upper class and upper caste. The real traditional gold jewellery is more expensive compared to other gold ornaments. These gold ornaments, in addition to their materialistic value, has more symbolic value as well. They are meant to be of intergenerational inheritance, and holds great value in the social and cultural milieu.

The coming of androgynous fashion made great changes in the world of dressing and adornment, but it was mostly

about clothing. “At its core, androgynous fashion challenges the binary framework that has historically dictated separate clothing for men and women ... it questions the cultural codes that assign meaning to colors, cuts, fabrics, and accessories” (Seattle wire). Even in this era of androgynous fashion and blending in of jewellery and fashion with gender fluidity, gold jewellery still remains associated with femininity. In Kerala, the advent of androgynous fashion could not make any change in the deeply entrenched gendered aspect of gold jewellery. It still remains as an aspect of femininity. Even if there occurs a photoshoot or a short video showing men wearing traditional gold jewellery which is usually worn by women, it just remains in those videos/photos alone. Hardly can we see men imitating that fashion in the day-to-day life, not even during any special occasion.

Gold in Advertisements

Advertisements play a crucial role in the construction of meaning around things. Advertisements are good at creating new customs and practices in the society. Ads, especially television ads, though short, are very impactful on individuals. They are powerful and impactful tools in creating social and cultural norms and rules. They penetrate messages and ideologies deep into the psyche of people. They affect and influence the audience and the audience would be too passive to notice the impact that advertisements have on them. The primary aim of advertisements is to inform customers or audience. But advertisements also play a major role in shaping and developing the needs and wants of the customers. They can even create false needs among people. Advertisements not only creates false needs; they also create meanings and construct realities; “Media do not simply reflect reality; they help to construct it” (Hall 1997). The impact that the advertisements have on customers even affect rational decision making. It is capable of constructing meanings related to gender, identity and consumption. Advertising is not just about selling products — it plays a *cultural role* in defining who women are and what is expected of them (Ciochetto).

Jewellery ads in Kerala presents gold not just as a commodity but associates cultural meanings to it. It is pinned to familial bonds, relationship between father and daughter, brother and sister, mother and child, and every other familial bond, thus giving it a sublime value. Jewellery ads in Kerala have ever since been following the same patterns and same content. It has always shown a wedding, a jewellery clad bride, a traditional Hindu wedding mostly, thus portraying gold jewellery as “feminine signifiers” (Valjakka) of beauty. Hardly can we ever find a jewellery ad that is not set in the backdrop of a

wedding, or one that has no female actor/model in it. So, on looking through the lens of jewellery ads in Kerala, it is evident that gold jewellery has always been associated with women and femininity. The change in perception is visible in the change in portrayal of women in the traditional social roles to the employed independent women with an agency of their own. Even in such ads, even though the style and fashion of the jewellery might change, the ad still tells that she needs jewellery, that is now called statement jewellery.

The two television ads taken for study, especially the Vinsmera advertisement, had gained ample popularity during the time of release and created much discussion, especially in the social media. The Vinsmera advertisement, released on 18 July 2025, titled “Truly Irresistible” was considered pathbreaking. ‘The Print’ described it as a television ad that ‘broke away from the traditional tropes of jewellery ads.’ Mohanlal, gracefully embracing his feminine energy. The advertisement, unlike other jewellery ads, does not show a wedding that background the gold, but the shooting site of a jewellery advertisement and Mohanlal appears in the advertisement as actor/ superstar Mohanlal himself. He is there to act in the advertisement within the advertisement and suddenly the crew finds the jewellery box that carried the entire set of jewellery missing and Prakash Varma, the actor/director of the advertisement, when he reaches the caravan to inform Mohanlal about the missing jewellery, finds him wearing the jewellery and enjoying, seeing himself dolled up in the gold necklace and ring. The expression of shock on the face of Prakash Varma could be the indication of seeing the lost jewellery on Mohanlal or more likely, the astonishment of seeing Mohanlal wear the gold jewellery that is supposed to be worn by a female actor. There, apparently, is a female model present and is seen being introduced to Mohanlal as the person who is to act along with him in the ad, wearing the gold necklace. During this instant of the ad, the female model is seen wearing the necklace before placing it in the jewellery box. Even though, the idea of replacing the female actor to showcase the jewellery by Mohanlal could be pathbreaking, the concept of showing him not as the person that he usually is, but as someone embracing the femininity in him on wearing a piece of jewellery leaves the space to ponder on the association between gold jewellery and gender.

The advertisement, though is primarily concerned about beauty, self-acceptance, gender, performance and embracing one’s identity. The macho identity of the super star Mohanlal did help in reducing the troll and agitation that could have been created had it been casted for another actor. And this proves the point that this paper tries to put forward. In the jewellery ad, an actor who has almost always portrayed characters of peak ‘masculinity’, is seen

performing/ embracing his ‘feminine side’. Why would wearing jewellery bring out the feminine side of a person? A man can wear gold jewellery and need not feel feminine. The concept of gender fluidity might be the idea that the creators might have intended to convey through this television ad but the fact that they used gold to convey such an idea and the act of using gold to showcase the embracing of femininity indirectly points towards the fact of association of gold with femininity. So, directly or indirectly, the advertisement reinstates the idea of gold jewellery being associated with female and femininity.

The Bhima Jewellery advertisement, released on 17 November 2021, titled “Pure as Love”, features the transgender actress Meera Singhania Rehani. The theme of the ad, like most other jewellery ad, was a Hindu wedding, but featuring a transwoman and her story of becoming. The second part was new. A jewellery ad on theme of a Hindu wedding (a very hetero-patriarchal set up), featuring a transwoman as the bride was new to the Malayali audience considering the fact that the Bhima jewellery customer base is in rural India, and the acceptance of such an advertisement could be doubtful.

The ad shows the journey of gender transformation of the character in the ad. When the ad begins, we see the protagonist looking at the horizon. The person treasures a pair of gold anklet, probably given by the family. The ad shows the protagonist slowly getting access to various materialistic aspects that adds to the feminine gender like jewellery, lipstick, clothes etc. As the ad and the transformation progress, the changes are very evident. She gets rid of the facial hair, grows her hair long, is seen happier compared to the older days. But what is most striking is the jewellery that she now wears. She starts adorning herself with more gold jewellery. This points towards the idea that the more she gets close to her female identity, the more jewellery she possesses. Or rather, the more the jewellery that she wears, the more pronounced is her femininity. Her identity as a woman peak when she is shown as a bride, clad top to bottom in gold in plenty. This reiterates the idea of ‘gender performativity’ (Butler), that adorning oneself with gold in a way that appeals to the society gives you certain gender identity, thus ‘gender becoming a bodily discipline’ (Bordo). Gender is not something that you are but something that you repeatedly over time, says Butler. So, wearing a *taali*, adorning more and more with gold jewellery can be considered as acts that produce femininity over time.

The ad definitely checks the boxes of inclusivity and can certainly be viewed as a groundbreaking one in the field of advertising. While these are true, there is also this hidden point of perception that gold jewellery is very much

associated with femininity. The adding in of more and more gold during the progressing stages of transformation of the gender identity of the character subtly announces the belief that “*pennaayal ponnu venam*”, which is roughly translated as ‘a girl must have gold’. This is a Malayalam quote and in the Malayalam language, there exists no such Malayalam quote that suggests that a man must have gold. When “man must have gold” could mean wealth and financial betterment, “a woman must have gold” means a woman must have gold jewellery.

Thus, these two television ads, though they break away from the usual style and content of jewellery ads, still holds the association of gold jewellery and femininity strong and intact. The intention on the periphery could be inclusivity, but the fact that it is yet another marketing strategy, cannot be ignored. Whatever be the case, every advertisement on gold jewellery still features women, and still ties it to the idea of femininity. Thus, to say that the Kerala society, whatever be the change in style and fashion and adornment, still associates gold jewellery to femininity, would hardly be an exaggeration. Hardly can a girl walk around with a neck bare of any ornaments. She will definitely be the victim of the question of “why?”, which is not the case with men. Men can go gold-free. Gold still affects men, but not through wearability or adornment but about accumulation, in the economic sense. Even though, there are people who wish to go for a gold-free wedding, many would not succeed in convincing their family with their idea of a bride without any gold jewellery. They would be asked to wear at least fake gold jewellery. Any bride who decides to have a gold-free wedding, has to encounter umpteen number of questions. It is impossible for a Malayali psyche to see a bride without any gold jewellery. Much entrenched is the association of gold with femininity in Kerala that the adorned body becomes a cultural text.

From the two advertisements discussed above, it can be inferred that in spite of all the progress happening around, the world becoming more inclusive and progressive, the association of gold jewellery and femininity cannot be diminished. Even though gold still holds the symbol of wealth, and power, the association with femininity supersedes or overshadows the other aspects of gold. This is evident from the amount gold that adorns a bride on the wedding day in spite of the rising gold price. Whatever be the price of gold, a Malayali family still finds it difficult to get their daughter/sister married off without enough gold and the association of gold jewellery and femininity continues.

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